

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINTH.

The Country in the Elbow of the Niger.--A Fantastic View of the Hombori Mountains.--Kabra.--Timbuctoo.--The Chart of Dr. Barth. --A Decaying City.--Whither Heaven wills.

During this dull Monday, Dr. Ferguson diverted his thoughts by giving his companions a thousand details concerning the country they were crossing. The surface, which was quite flat, offered no impediment to their progress. The doctor's sole anxiety arose from the obstinate northeast wind which continued to blow furiously, and bore them away from the latitude of Timbuctoo.

The Niger, after running northward as far as that city, sweeps around, like an immense water-jet from some fountain, and falls into the Atlantic in a broad sheaf. In the elbow thus formed the country is of varied character, sometimes luxuriantly fertile, and sometimes extremely bare; fields of maize succeeded by wide spaces covered with broom-corn and uncultivated plains. All kinds of aquatic birds--pelicans, wild-duck, kingfishers, and the rest--were seen in numerous flocks hovering about the borders of the pools and torrents.

From time to time there appeared an encampment of Touaregs, the men sheltered under their leather tents,

while their women were busied with the domestic toil outside, milking their camels and smoking their huge-bowled pipes.

By eight o'clock in the evening the Victoria had advanced more than two hundred miles to the westward, and our aeronauts became the spectators of a magnificent scene.

A mass of moonbeams forcing their way through an opening in the clouds, and gliding between the long lines of falling rain, descended in a golden shower on the ridges of the Hombori Mountains. Nothing could be more weird than the appearance of these seemingly basaltic summits; they stood out in fantastic profile against the sombre sky, and the beholder might have fancied them to be the legendary ruins of some vast city of the middle ages, such as the icebergs of the polar seas sometimes mimic them in nights of gloom.

"An admirable landscape for the 'Mysteries of Udolpho!'" exclaimed the doctor. "Ann Radcliffe could not have depicted yon mountains in a more appalling aspect."

"Faith!" said Joe, "I wouldn't like to be strolling alone in the evening through this country of ghosts. Do you see now, master, if it wasn't so heavy, I'd like to carry

that whole landscape home to Scotland! It would do for the borders of Loch Lomond, and tourists would rush there in crowds."

"Our balloon is hardly large enough to admit of that little experiment--but I think our direction is changing. Bravo!--the elves and fairies of the place are quite obliging. See, they've sent us a nice little southeast breeze, that will put us on the right track again."

In fact, the Victoria was resuming a more northerly route, and on the morning of the 20th she was passing over an inextricable network of channels, torrents, and streams, in fine, the whole complicated tangle of the Niger's tributaries. Many of these channels, covered with a thick growth of herbage, resembled luxuriant meadow-lands. There the doctor recognized the route followed by the explorer Barth when he launched upon the river to descend to Timbuctoo. Eight hundred fathoms broad at this point, the Niger flowed between banks richly grown with cruciferous plants and tamarind-trees. Herds of agile gazelles were seen skipping about, their curling horns mingling with the tall herbage, within which the alligator, half concealed, lay silently in wait for them with watchful eyes.

Long files of camels and asses laden with merchandise from Jenne were winding in under the noble trees. Ere

long, an amphitheatre of low-built houses was discovered at a turn of the river, their roofs and terraces heaped up with hay and straw gathered from the neighboring districts.

"There's Kabra!" exclaimed the doctor, joyously;
"there is the harbor of Timbuctoo, and the city is not five miles from here!"

"Then, sir, you are satisfied?" half queried Joe.

"Delighted, my boy!"

"Very good; then every thing's for the best!"

In fact, about two o'clock, the Queen of the Desert, mysterious Timbuctoo, which once, like Athens and Rome, had her schools of learned men, and her professorships of philosophy, stretched away before the gaze of our travellers.

Ferguson followed the most minute details upon the chart traced by Barth himself, and was enabled to recognize its perfect accuracy.

The city forms an immense triangle marked out upon a vast plain of white sand, its acute angle directed toward the north and piercing a corner of the desert. In the environs

there was almost nothing, hardly even a few grasses, with some dwarf mimosas and stunted bushes.

As for the appearance of Timbuctoo, the reader has but to imagine a collection of billiard-balls and thimbles--such is the bird's-eye view! The streets, which are quite narrow, are lined with houses only one story in height, built of bricks dried in the sun, and huts of straw and reeds, the former square, the latter conical. Upon the terraces were seen some of the male inhabitants, carelessly lounging at full length in flowing apparel of bright colors, and lance or musket in hand; but no women were visible at that hour of the day.

"Yet they are said to be handsome," remarked the doctor. "You see the three towers of the three mosques that are the only ones left standing of a great number--the city has indeed fallen from its ancient splendor! At the top of the triangle rises the Mosque of Sankore, with its ranges of galleries resting on arcades of sufficiently pure design. Farther on, and near to the Sane-Gungu quarter, is the Mosque of Sidi-Yahia and some two-story houses. But do not look for either palaces or monuments: the sheik is a mere son of traffic, and his royal palace is a counting-house."

"It seems to me that I can see half-ruined ramparts,"

said Kennedy.

"They were destroyed by the Fouillanes in 1826; the city was one-third larger then, for Timbuctoo, an object generally coveted by all the tribes, since the eleventh century, has belonged in succession to the Touaregs, the Sonrayans, the Morocco men, and the Fouillanes; and this great centre of civilization, where a sage like Ahmed-Baba owned, in the sixteenth century, a library of sixteen hundred manuscripts, is now nothing but a mere half-way house for the trade of Central Africa."

The city, indeed, seemed abandoned to supreme neglect; it betrayed that indifference which seems epidemic to cities that are passing away. Huge heaps of rubbish encumbered the suburbs, and, with the hill on which the market-place stood, formed the only inequalities of the ground.

When the Victoria passed, there was some slight show of movement; drums were beaten; but the last learned man still lingering in the place had hardly time to notice the new phenomenon, for our travellers, driven onward by the wind of the desert, resumed the winding course of the river, and, ere long, Timbuctoo was nothing more than one of the fleeting reminiscences of their journey.

"And now," said the doctor, "Heaven may waft us whither it pleases!"

"Provided only that we go westward," added Kennedy.

"Bah!" said Joe; "I wouldn't be afraid if it was to go back to Zanzibar by the same road, or to cross the ocean to America."

"We would first have to be able to do that, Joe!"

"And what's wanting, doctor?"

"Gas, my boy; the ascending force of the balloon is evidently growing weaker, and we shall need all our management to make it carry us to the sea-coast. I shall even have to throw over some ballast. We are too heavy."

"That's what comes of doing nothing, doctor; when a man lies stretched out all day long in his hammock, he gets fat and heavy. It's a lazybones trip, this of ours, master, and when we get back every body will find us big and stout."

"Just like Joe," said Kennedy; "just the ideas for him: but wait a bit! Can you tell what we may have to go through yet? We are still far from the end of our trip."

Where do you expect to strike the African coast, doctor?"

"I should find it hard to answer you, Kennedy. We are at the mercy of very variable winds; but I should think myself fortunate were we to strike it between Sierra Leone and Portendick. There is a stretch of country in that quarter where we should meet with friends."

"And it would be a pleasure to press their hands; but, are we going in the desirable direction?"

"Not any too well, Dick; not any too well! Look at the needle of the compass; we are bearing southward, and ascending the Niger toward its sources."

"A fine chance to discover them," said Joe, "if they were not known already. Now, couldn't we just find others for it, on a pinch?"

"Not exactly, Joe; but don't be alarmed: I hardly expect to go so far as that."

At nightfall the doctor threw out the last bags of sand. The Victoria rose higher, and the blow-pipe, although working at full blast, could scarcely keep her up. At that time she was sixty miles to the southward of Timbuctoo, and in the morning the aeronauts awoke over the banks of the

Niger, not far from Lake Debo.